

## CHAPTER THREE

**T**he rain slowed to a steady drizzle, falling like small gobs of spit from the cloudy sky above. Small puddles of rainwater gathered in tiny potholes, which marked the road like pepperoni across a cement pizza. Droplets of water sent little circular waves rippling out to the edges of the puddles as they landed. The dark, cloudy night shimmered and danced in the reflections as the raindrops skipped over the surface of the water. Suddenly one reflection went dark. A foot hovered over the small puddle, blacking out the night. Then, the foot stomped down. Water splashed up out of the pothole as the foot sunk ankle deep, soaking the canvas of the shoe. The

foot didn't seem to care in the least. The leg that was attached to the foot didn't seem to care in the least. Even the metal bolts that stuck out of the neck that sat above the torso that was attached to the legs didn't seem to care.

"Orange soda, sweet orangey goodness... no, not goodness, evil!" Fran-Kel-Stein moaned, his arms stretched out in front of him like a sleepwalker as he lumbered down the street, sloshing through puddles as he went about his monstrous way. "Orange soda!"

Life had recently gotten very strange for Kel. When he woke up this morning he assumed it would just be a regular day. You know, hang out with Kenan, get into some trouble, drink some orange soda, and see what new foods he could fit into his nose. The idea that he would be abducted by Kenan's boss, strapped to a table, and turned into a superstrong monster never even crossed his mind.

But something else had happened to him in the transformation. Something unexpected. Not only had Chris's experiment magnified his strength to a level rivaling that of professional wrestlers but it also had had the unforeseen effect of magnifying his desire for orange soda.

Kel had always loved orange soda. In fact, he had once even looked into the option of many-



ling orange soda (he couldn't). He loved drinking orange soda. He loved staring at orange soda. He even loved the words orange and soda. But now that love had become something more. Something deeper. Something darker. Something . . . oranger. Now, he didn't just want orange soda, he needed orange soda. It was all he could think about. It was all that consumed his monastery brain. Even the small gap in his monastery teeth seemed to shout out for the sweet, syrupy goodness of a nice cool orange beverage.

A small dog wandered across the street, the black pads of its paws patterring over the pavement like some very quiet drum solo. A small black nose flared wildly as it sniffed the road, searching the air for the scent of a nice fire hydrant or bone or New York strip steak that someone may have accidentally left lying around the deserted street. Suddenly the dog stopped. Two small cold nostrils flared. There was a strange smell in the air. A wet, monastery, gap-toothed smell. The dog cocked its furry head up into the air. Its two furry dog eyes shot open wide as the large lumbering smell reached down and picked it up.

Kel held the small furry dog in his grasp and stared at it. "Orange soda?" he asked questioningly as he turned the small furry creature

around to look at it from all angles. He sniffed it. It didn't smell like orange soda.

The dog sniffed him back. He didn't smell like a fire hydrant.

A scarred and discolored tongue poked its way out of the Kel-thing's mouth and proceeded to lick the dog. It didn't taste like orange soda. In fact, he was pretty certain that orange soda had never left any sort of hairy remains in his mouth after drinking it.

Orange soda bottles, as best as he could remember, also didn't lick you back, which made it all that much more odd when the furry thing in his hands began doing just that. Kel tried to wrap his new, monastery brain around this complex puzzle. The thing in his hand walked on its own, it was furry, it wasn't orange, it didn't contain any liquid, and it licked back. So, could it really be orange soda?

Fran-Kel-Stein raised a large finger up to his chin and scratched thoughtfully as he wrestled with the question. Lines of concentration creased the lines of monastery scars that marked his forehead. As monsters go, he wasn't that bright.

Then the thing in his hands barked. That clinched it. It was definitely not orange soda. With a self-satisfied smile etched across his



face, the Kel monster set the dog down and went on with his search. Holding his hands out toward the night, he shuffled off into the distance, moaning to nobody in particular, "Orange soda."

A row of street lamps burned through the night, casting wan pools of yellow across the sidewalk below. A row of houses lined either side of the small street, which ended in a cul-de-sac. The houses all looked pretty much the same. Same sloped roofs. Same large garage that spread itself across most of the front of the house. Same large picture window that looked out from the living room to the quiet street beyond. Even the same banners that hung quietly over the same front doors. The banners flapped gently in the night breeze, each one stamping the house with its own unique identity.

A pineapple flapped and flowed from the front of the pastel blue house. Welcome was embroidered across another in large, friendly red letters, which just happened to clash with the neon pink of the rest of the structure. A large bottle of orange soda swayed and nipped through the night as it hung proudly over the door of the bright orange house at the end of the street.

Theodore Knutson was very proud of what he did for a living. It was a job that his father had done, and his father before him, and Theodore had managed to carry on the proud family tradition with honor and dignity. Some men were astronauts, some were rocket scientists or brain surgeons. Theodore Knutson was an orange soda taster.

It was Theodore's job to taste each and every bottle of orange soda before it left the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory and made its orangey journey to thirsty bellies across the land. Theodore would take the smallest of sips from each one, swishing the orangey beverage around in his mouth to search for three key things. First, flavor. It was important that the soda not be too ripe or too sour. Theodore had to make sure that the Wavy Lion Orange Soda Company had achieved exactly the right balance between sugar, water, and artificial orange flavoring number seventeen.

The second thing that Theodore checked for was bubbleness. It was important that the soda be fizzy enough to tickle his nose as he drank but not so bubbly that he ran the risk of having his stomach explode later on in the day.

The third and last thing that Theodore checked for was color. It had to be just the right



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shade of orange. Not too apple red, not too land yellow, but just right.

Yes, Theodore loved his job. After all, orange soda had paid for his house. Orange soda had paid for the braces on his kid's teeth, and when drinking too much orange soda had rotted those teeth right out, orange soda footed the bill to buy new teeth. That was why Theodore Knutson wore orange soda T-shirts and orange soda caps. And that was why he proudly flew the orange soda flag in front of his house.

The Keel monster stopped right in the center of one of the circular pools of light that was thrown across the ground by the tall streetlights looming up into the sky above. His eyes narrowed as he peered off into the distance. A glint caught the corner of his eyes, like a diamond sparkling in a pool of brown, or glitter that had been spilled across a round pile of dirt.

A smile brightened up his face. A small electric spark of joy shot out from the bolts in his neck. He had spotted that which he was searching for. His quest was at an end. He had found orange soda.

Fran-Keel-Stein stepped up to the front door of the Knutsons' bright orange abode. He looked up at the banner that flew above the

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bright orange door. And with a loud, guttural, monstrous roar, he exclaimed, "Orange soda!" Then he turned the knob and pushed open the door.

"Man, I can't believe that you turned my best friend into a crazed superstrong monster that has to wander the land in search of orange soda! What were you thinking?" Kernan demanded as he paced back and forth across the dingy tile floor of Rigby's grocery.

Chris looked up apologetically from behind the magazine he was reading. A large headline stretched its way across the magazine's glossy front cover. It read, "How to Take Over the World and Still Have Time for You!"

"I'm sorry, Kernan," he stated in his flat, nasal voice. "I was only trying to use him as a mindless foot soldier in my scheme for world domination. How could I have known that it would turn out so badly?"

Kernan's brow furrowed. His dreadlocks stood up in concentration as he walked from one wall of the store to the other, then pivoted on his heel and marched back the other way. He had to figure out a way to find Keel before he hurt somebody, or before he got hurt, or before he did something really strange that made people



look at him and shake their heads and mumble "What's wrong with that boy?" under their breaths.

"Man, we gotta find him!" Keran grumbled to himself. "But how? He could be anywhere."

Chris frowned. "If only Mother were here. She'd know what to do. Unfortunately, she's not back from that expedition to climb Mount Everest." A glazed, faraway look settled over Chris's eyes as he imagined his dear, blue-haired old mother ascending the majestic peak of the world's highest mountain and planting the Potter family flag into the snow to mark the achievement. It was a proud moment for Potters everywhere. A small tear welled up in one of Chris's eyes, and he quickly dabbed it away.

Keran couldn't have cared less about Chris's mother. He couldn't have cared less about Mount Everest. And he certainly couldn't have cared less about any flag-planting or Potter family achievements. None of that stuff concerned him. What did concern him was finding the monstrous creature that had, until recently, been his goofy best friend.

Keran wrung his hands together in front of him as his mind raced and sputtered and stopped to gasp for air before beginning to race

and sputter all over again in its desperate search for a plan.

Then it hit him. His eyes rifled open. His head jerked up as the weight of the idea smacked him right between the eyes like a ton of marshmallows that had been superglued to a ton of bricks. A finger shot its way excitedly into the air. "I got it! What is the one thing that Kel can't resist?" A lewd, scheming, gleaming sort of grin broke out across Keran's lips and raced its way up the sides of his cheeks. "Chris," he said, an excited chuckle lacking his voice, "I got a plan."

The house was dark and quiet. A digital clock hung in the long, narrow hallway, casting eerie, lined shadows across the white walls. One of the shadows seemed to lurch forward in stumbling, staggering jerks of movement. The shadow crept its way down the hall and into the silent kitchen beyond.

Theodore Krutson couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, fighting desperately to try and get comfortable. He tried lying on his back, but that didn't work. He tried his side and his front and his other side, but none of them were comfortable. After that he began to get creative. He tried one leg twisted back underneath the other with both hands clutched across his chest. No



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good. He tried tucking his head between his knees while wearing a top hat and humming a song, but he still couldn't fall asleep. He tossed again, throwing a leg across the length of the bed. Then, after one more fruitless and frustrating turn, he gave up.

I bet, he thought, a nice glass of orange soda will do the trick. Theodore Knutson had been wrong before. But never had he been quite so unarguably, totally, completely and without a doubt as wrong as he was right at that moment. He stood, stretched his hands toward the ceiling, pulled a bright orange robe around his skinny pencil of a body, and tramped down the hallway toward the kitchen.

He didn't bother turning on a light—after all, he had lived in that house for ten years. He knew every in and out, every nook and cranny. He even knew the nooks and crannies of the nooks and crannies. He knew every smell, every noise—well, almost every noise. He didn't seem at all sure what the loud, strange gulping noise coming from his kitchen was.

He froze. Someone was in his house. He fought to keep his body under control and stay silent. But even his soft breathing sounded to him like someone had turned the volume of his lungs up to maximum. Fear ran across his body.

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stuck its fingers in its ears, and wiggled them tantalizingly at him. Fear was kind of mean that way. A small electric twinge raced up his spinal cord, reached the top of his head, and jumped off to try and go find a safer place to live.

But then something strange happened. The beer was still there, but something new was hanging out with it, chatting with it, befriending it. That something else was anger. After all, this was his house. And he, Theodore Knutson, orange soda taster number forty-one, was not about to stand idly by while someone ransacked or burgled or messed up his house.

Slowly his hand crept through the air. His fingertips grazed the wall, and he navigated through the darkness until he came to the plastic casing of the light switch.

He steaked his nerves but soon realized that it was too late; his nerves had all run away, so he steaked his liver instead. He sucked in a deep, quiet breath of air, and then, with one swift motion, he flipped the switch.

Light flooded the room, revealing the awful, gruesome sight to Theodore's eyes. He screamed, a loud bloodcurdling scream of someone who has just seen something awful, like a murder.

The monster also screamed, throwing his



hands up over his monstrous eyes to protect them from the blinding, and surprisingly sudden, light. But the creature—with his purple hat and his metal bolts that poked out from his neck—wasn't the real horror. The real horror lay strewn across the room like the wreckage of a great and bloody battle. Battered, plastic war-torn toys lay broken and beaten across the floor of the kitchen, their life essence dripping out in sticky pools of orange across the tile.

Theodore pulled his hands away from his wide and frightened eyes as they took in the full orange soda carnage that was spread out before him.

Crushed bottles and crumpled bottles and smashed bottles lay in tangled heaps across the room. Most had been drained completely, but some still had enough soda in them to fill the room with a strong, pungent soda smell. As the vision of horror filled the soda taster's eyes, he opened his mouth and screamed again. It was truly an awful sight, and besides, he wondered, who's gonna clean all of this up?

The monster was startled. He wasn't used to these bright lights and loud screams. And so, he did the one thing that a freakish monster could do: he ran... right through the kitchen wall. It took a moment before he realized that he had

just smashed his way into the bathroom, but when he did, he quickly smashed through another wall into the garage and then, finally, one more wall and he was outside.

His lips seemed to glow with the orange stain of guilt in the weak yellow lamps of the street.

He was confused. He had thoughts of evil things and yet he craved orange soda. His monster mind was racing, but it wasn't quite able to catch up to where his monster body had taken him. It was still back enjoying the moment when he pulled off the refrigerator door with a soft, fluffy pop and saw the rows and rows of glowing, life-giving orange soda inside. His mind quickly ran through the part where he grabbed bottles after bottle of orange soda and sucked them down, and it barely made it to the part where he was startled by the bright light before a voice cried out in the night.

"Look at him. He's a monster!" a gray-haired man shouted as he stepped out onto his driveway.

Theodore Knutson burst from his house, pulling his orange robe even tighter around him. "That thing!" he shouted with the rough and earned voice of someone who has come in contact with true evil and watched it drink orange soda. "He drank all my orange soda!"



A crowd began to form. Too many voices began to assault Fran-Kel-Stein's ears. Too many fingers began to point accusingly at him. Too many eyes glared in his direction.

"He's a freak!" a woman's voice shouted from the back of the growing circle of onlookers.

"He's after our orange soda! No one will be safe!" another, deeper voice cried out.

More shouts and jeers were spat out from the crowd as they began slowly closing in on Kel. But deep in the depths of his monstrous mind, all the voices blurred into one low verbal mush. All the words jumbled together, except two. The only words that he could hear above the din were orange soda. Orange soda. Orange soda. He needed more. He was desperate for it. His head pounded and throbbed. Orange soda. Orange soda. Orange soda.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He threw his hands above his head menacingly and belched out a deep, growling, monstrous roar of thirst, which shook the air as it rose to the heavens.

The crowd leapt back as one, suddenly frightened by the raging monster before them. It charged. Women and children dove out of the way as the fiendish terror that was Kel stormed by them, shoving his way through the masses of

people until he emerged on the other side. He slipped. The crowd lay hushed in terrible terror-stricken silence.

Slowly, the creature turned to face them, the small gap between its teeth just barely visible behind the orange-stained lips. "Excuse me," Kel said very politely, "but do any of you know which way the orange soda factory is?"

Theodore Knutson spoke up without thinking. "Sure, it's down that way," he answered, pointing off into the distance, "just off Route 9." Suddenly, he realized what he was saying and, more important, who he was saying it to. He caught himself midword and stopped. "I mean... uh... I don't know," he stammered not terribly convincingly and retreated back into the crowd. "Thanks." Kel grinned toward the crowd, threw his head back, roared one more time, then stormed off toward Route 9.

"Damn," Theodore uttered from the back of the crowd as the phantom figure faded away into the distance.



feet dug for footholds in the wire mesh of the fence.

It made sense that if Kel had been turned into a hideous monster who had to quench his crazed orange thirst any way he could, he would eventually find his way here. And when he did, he would find Kenan here waiting for him. A smug little grin turned the corners of Kenan's lips up as he swiftly pulled himself up to the top of the fence. He hefted his frame over the top and slowly began to lower himself back down the other side. Slip! BAM! His fingers lost their grip, and, across his friendly round features, Kenan plummeted to the ground below.

"Ooooff!" he commented dramatically as he crashed into the soft earth. His eyes narrowed up into tiny slits of pain as he added to no one in particular, "That really hurt."

"Here, Kenan, catch." Chris's voice drifted down from the top of the fence. Chris agreed to help Kenan. After all, it was Chris's fault Kel was now a monster. Kenan glanced up just in time to see Chris dropping his backpack down to him.

Kenan didn't have time to catch. He didn't have time to move. All he had time for, as the canvas bag dropped through the sky, growing eternally bigger and bigger in his vision, was to

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Kenan's plan was simple. It was so simple, in fact, that he was almost surprised that he had thought of it. Usually, Kenan preferred much more complicated plans. The kind of plans that had a very good chance of not working out exactly as he hoped. It was much more of a challenge that way. But this one was simple. Perfect. There was no chance of anything going wrong. His hand reached out and clutched the top railing of the tall chain-link fence that surrounded the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory. He strained his other hand up and wrapped his fingers around the bar. His body hung in the air, suspended ten feet over the ground below as his



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mutter a very quick "Awww man" before the backpack landed right on his belly.

For such a simple plan, it was seeming awfully painful.

"There he is! Get him!" The grey-haired old lady pounded on the concrete sidewalk with the end of her thick black cane. "It's the monster." Her wrinkled old lips quivered with a mixture of fear and glee as her wrinkled old eyes stared off into the distance. "He stole my orange soda!"

She raised a withered old arm and stretched it off down the street toward the Kel-shaped shadow that was shuffling off into the distance.

The crowd of townsfolk paused just long enough to follow the old lady's finger down the street before they stormed off after the monster, screaming into the night.

Forty pairs of feet marched off down the rain-soaked street. Old men and young men, women of all ages, even a couple of dogs had all gathered together on this dark, wet evening for one purpose—to track down a monster and keep their fair city safe, or at least to keep their orange soda safe, but either way it was very important. And so they had left their homes in the dark of night, grabbed the nearest stick or shov-

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el or lumpy pillow that would really hurt if you got hit with it, and headed off in search of a groovy, gap-toothed creature.

Bright, fiery torches were clutched in the townspeople's hands, casting a flickering red glow across the night in spite of the fact that the streets were plenty well lit by streetlights and the fact that no one carried torches except in horror movies.

Fran-Kel-Stein heard the crowd behind him. Heard their angry shouts. Heard their loud footsteps pounding the Chicago streets. Even heard when they got lost and had to stop and ask directions. But he didn't care about any of that. He was on a mission.

His super eyes squinted up tightly as they scanned the darkness ahead of him, searching and finally finding what he was looking for. A large, monstrous grin spread out across his face. His brown eyes glazed over with joy.

Spread out before him was the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory. Actually, spread out before him was a tall chain-link fence, but behind that chain-link fence lay the majesty of the world's largest and most brightly colored soda manufacturing plant.

Fran-Kel-Stein's whole hideously scarred body began to tingle with that special sort of ex-



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citement that only evil, monstrous freaks of science can feel. Then, almost as if it had been planned for this exact moment, the soda plant behind him flickered to life. All the lights in all the buildings lit up at once. The giant fountain of orange soda that sat by the front entrance to welcome visitors and soak them in sticky orange soda sprang to life, spouting orange water high into the air. But more impressive than any of that, more impressive than the soda machine that began dispensing free orange soda to whoever wanted it, more impressive even than the ten-foot-tall plastic Navy Lion mascot that sprang to life, wagging its lion tail back and forth like a frisky, plastic cat, was the soda factory's glorious and crowning achievement. The main building, which snapped into glowing orange life at just that moment, was shaped like a giant forty-story bottle of orange soda. Even the lights in the window had a warm glow of orange. By mandate of company policy, every lightbulb that burned in the "bottle building," as it was called, had to be an orange lightbulb. And, apart from driving up the rate of employee work-related insanity, the policy had been a rousing success. It was truly an amazing sight to behold.

The Kel monster grunted a surprised and

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impressed-sounding grunt. After all, if there was one thing better than a bottle of orange soda, it was a twenty-story bottle of orange soda. And it was all his.

He grabbed the fence and, almost without effort, ripped an entire section out of the ground. His gaze locked onto the huge orange vision in the distance, and he hurriedly shuffled off toward it, dragging his feet through the grass of the compound as fast as his superstrong legs would carry him.

Kuman stood next to the main power switch for the entire complex, which he had just switched on. He watched as the factory sprang to life, lighting up like a ghost town that had been reclaimed by its ghosts.

He knew Kel would come here. Knew it in his gut. Deep down in his liver and his spleen, he was sure that his friend would seek out the one place that had always given him comfort... and then. And so he knew that if he was going to trap him, it would have to be here.

That was the simple part of his plan. Now came the part that was slightly more complicated. How do you capture a creature with super strength and super vision and a super-powerful threat?



Chris rushed into the room and came to a screeching halt in front of Keran.

"Keran, he's here," he yelled excitedly.

A soft nod was Keran's only reply. Under his

breath, almost silently, he added, "I know."

Keran could almost feel his friend's presence. He knew the moment that Kel, or whatever it was that Kel had become, arrived at the soda factory. It was something in the air. An energy, a feeling . . . actually, it was more of a smell. Kel really needed to take a shower. He shook.

Chris stared up at Keran through tiny, expectant eyes. "What do we do now?" he asked, relieved to be free of the burden of mad scientisthood. If even for a little while.

Keran's eyebrows slithered nervously across his forehead, and he fought for a moment to calm them down. "Uh . . . well . . . we," he started, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. He didn't. "We lure him to the bottle building and then we . . . drop a giant net on him." Keran nodded to himself, bobbing his head up and down proudly at the plan he had just made up on the spot. "Yeah," he added with a little more confidence. "That's what we'll do. Chris," he stated, fixing his boss with a steely-eyed glare, "call in the choppers."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Three sets of metal blades beat the night air with steady whoops as they spun in blinding circles on top of the helicopters, holding them aloft as they slid through the dark sky. Large spotlights blazed out from the front of the helicopters, illuminating bright patches of the night in their pure white gaze.

The three helicopters swooped down low over the plant, white beams of light crisscrossing in front of them like swords in the sky. They buzzed low over the ground, gliding like large, ugly metallic birds until they reached the end of the property. Then, sailing up over the chain-link fence, they banked in a sharp turn and



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headed back over the plant again. That was when they spotted him.

Feverish thoughts danced like elephants in tap shoes across Kei's scientifically altered brain. Questions that had never occurred to him before began occurring to him as the promise of orange soda loomed so invitingly in his near future—important questions like *Why am I here?* and *What is the meaning of life?* Then, since the answer to that was obviously orange soda, he moved on to other, more complicated thoughts like *I wonder what Kenan's parents are cooking for dinner tonight?* Another thought quickly leapt in to join the growing throng of thoughts that was building up inside his monetary head. That thought was this: *What are those bright lights in the sky?* That thought was quickly followed by this one: *Hey, I bet those lights are aliens from another planet that have come here to steal Earth's supply of orange soda.* A nervous twitch twittered across the corner of his eyes as he imagined the bright alien lights falling across the world's supply of orange soda and the aliens taking it back to their home world.

"You leave our orange soda alone!" he screamed to the bright circles lighting up the darkened ground.

## CHAPTER 1

Suddenly the beams illuminated him. He looked like the world's largest lightbulb as all these spotlights converged on Kei at once.

"We've got him in our sights," the helmeted helicopter pilot barked into the microphone. He leaned out from behind the shaded visor that hid his eyes from the bright glare of the sun, or in this case, the slightly less bright glare of the moon. Actually, he just liked to wear them because they made him look cool and mysterious, but he would always tell people that it was to protect his eyes from whatever bright glare he would think of at the moment.

The radio that sat in the middle of a high-tech bank of gadgets and controls and buttons and switches crackled to life.

"Chopper one! Chopper one! This is Base." The voice was laced with static, but it seemed to sound a lot like Kenan's voice.

If you could have seen behind the helicopter pilot's sun visor, you would have seen a look of confusion rush across his young pilot face. "Base? Uh... I thought your name was Kenan," he said curiously into the microphone attached to his helmet. The headset microphone made him look a lot like an employee at a fast-food drive-through, except for the fact that the



pilot was less likely to end his sentences with "Would you like fries with that?"

"My name is Keran!" Keran's voice cracked across the airwaves, an irritated tone detectable behind the static. "Base is my code name."

The helmeted head of the pilot bobbed up and down slightly. "Oh! I get it. Your code name. Hey, what's my code name?" A small expectant grin broke out underneath his pilot's visor as visions of cool piloty code names danced across his head. Maybe he would be known as Viper or Rogue or Pumpkin Head, which was what his mother called him, probably because his head was orange and round and looked a lot like a pumpkin.

"Would you forget about your code name!" Keran yelled through the radio. "Just drop the net before he gets away."

"Fine. You don't have to get snippy," the pilot sniffed. "I mean, is it really that hard to give me a code name?" he mumbled almost to himself.

"All right. You want a code name? Your code is Doofus. Now drop the net, Doofus!"

The pilot's face lit up. Doofus... not bad. With a proud nod of his head, he ordered the other two helicopters to move into drop formation.

The three metal whirlybirds slid into a single

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line in the sky. Doofus led the pack. After all, he was the only one with a code name.

Fran-Kel-Stein swung his arms around his head like he was trying to sweat away an annoying grut. "Leave the orange soda alone, you evil aliens. Go get your own!"

The first helicopter screamed down out of the sky like a demented hawk that was closing in on its prey. It swooped low over the Kel monster's head, and it released its payload.

A large net fell from the sky, like a meteor that was made out of rope and had a lot of holes in it. It landed on top of Fran-Kel-Stein, tangling him up in its crisscrossing twine mesh.

"Doofus to Base. Doofus to Base. Direct hit," the pilot acknowledged with the combined pride of a job well done and a cool code name.

Fran-Kel-Stein roared a loud, angry, evil roar of rage as the net fell across his head. He stuck his hands through the small holes in the net and worked with all his super, evil strength. A large jagging hole tore into the side of the net, and Fran-Kel-Stein stepped through it, freeing himself.

He wasn't safe here on the ground. Something in the back of his altered mind told him that he was in danger. It was either something in the back of his mind or the fact that alien spaceships

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kept sweeping down out of the sky to try and capture him and take him to their alien home world. Not to mention the large, torch-bearing crowd of townsfolk who had chased him all the way here with the sole purpose of stopping him and saving their precious supply of orange soda. A second helicopter began its whirling descent toward Fran-Kel-Stein, its rotors cutting the air like giant eggbeaters that had been attached to the top of a very large toaster. But this time Fran-Kel-Stein was ready for it. He quickly darted out of the way as a second net fell toward him, landing in a discarded pile on the ground. He had to get away. And, as far as he was concerned, there was only one place to go.

Keman nervously chewed on the ends of his fingernails as he hunched over the small radio. He had good reason to be nervous. After all, his best friend had been turned into a monster and was now being chased by an angry mob that was set on destroying him. Kel's only chance of survival, not to mention getting turned back to normal, was for Keman, Chris, and their crack team of helicopter pilots to capture him before the mob did. And on top of all that, it was a school night, and Keman's parents were going to kill him for being out so late.

"Doo-fus to Base. Doo-fus to Base," the helicopter pilot's voice boomed from the radio.

"Base here."

"He got away. He's climbing the bottle building. We're going to try to knock him off."

Keman's cheeks had begun to ache from the constant expression of worry that they had held for a record-breaking six hours. It didn't look like they were going to get a break anytime in the near future.

He grabbed the microphone and yanked it to his face. "Don't knock him off. You'll hurt him. Mapest, don't try and knock him off of the building."

A wave of static burst across the radio's small speaker. "Come again, Base." The voice barely broke through the loud crackling noise. "I didn't say that."

Keman clutched the microphone tighter in his hand.

"Keman! Kel is climbing the bottle building!" Chris burst into the room, tripped over his own feet, and crashed right into the little wooden table that the radio sat on.

Keman's eyes went wide as he watched the scene unfold before him, almost in slow motion. The table tipped over. The radio went flying. Chris hit the ground hard just seconds before the